DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 901 CS 007 537

AUTHOR Bosma, Bette
TITLE Focus on Folktales for Critical Reading.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Reading; *Critical Thinking; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Elementary Education; *Folk Culture; Grade 6; *Literature Appreciation; *Motivation Techniques; *Reading Instruction; Reading Interests; Student Motivation; Teaching Methods; Units of Study

ABSTRACT

A 3-month unit on folktales with two sixth-grade classes proved to be a highly motivating means of developing critical reading skills. Lessons, which generally occupied from four to six class periods each, involved four steps: (1) the teacher stated the skills to be learned and told students what was planned for the reading period each day; (2) the teacher read aloud one or more folktales appropriate to the lesson and initiated a discussion on the reading material; (3) students selected books from the collection and read them independently or with partners, giving attention to the skill for that lesson; and (4) students participated in various forms of discussion and demonstrated critical reading skills through posters, creative writing, story telling, and dramatization. Over the course of the unit, students improved their ability to classify types of folktales and to make evaluative comparisons. They continued to show strong interest in having the teacher read aloud and frequently expressed interest in reading independently. Filled with rich language, adventure, and humor, folk literature appears particularly well adapted to the interests and needs of sixth grade students. (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Bette Bosma

ED241901

FOCUS ON FOLKTALES FOR CRITICAL READING

"Come on, we want to hear a story today."

"Can we choose books today?"

"Will you read Third Gift to us? I tried it and it's too hard, but it looks so good."

These were the greetings Mrs. Bradford heard when her exuberant sixth graders rushed into reading class. The week before they had begun a study of folk literature, with an emphasis on developing critical reading skills. Plans for motivating the children to read were laid aside, because the children had generated their own enthusiasm for reading. Direct teaching of critical reading-thinking skills was in progress and was enthusiastically received by the pupils because of their interest in the appealing collection of folk literature in their classroom. This article describes a classroom experiment in which specific critical reading skills were taught through reading folk literature.

Combining folk literature and critical reading

Folk literature was selected for the study because the wide variety of stories within the genre contain adventure, humor, and rich language that children enjoy. The multidimension of the folktale made it possible for the child to understand the story at a depth appropriate to the reader. The predictable story patterns in folktales and the stock characterization fit the child's sense of story schema, and made it possible for the least able readers to find stories that they were able to read and enjoy.

Critical reading was chosen as the skill focus because of the need to

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Bette Bosma
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS007 537

develop critical readers in today's society. The 1981 National Assessment report on reading and literature, Reading, Thinking, and Writing revealed that nine and thirteen year olds showed an improvement in learning to read a wide range of material since the 1974-75 tests. However, the students had developed few skills for understanding and evaluating the ideas that they receive from their reading. At age nine, only 2% of the students were able to evaluate stories giving supporting evidence, and at age thirteen, only 7.7% included evaluative support. Readers can be taught how to get meaning from language cues and to apply their own background of experience to evaluate the story. Teaching strategies used with guiding folktale reading were effective in developing this ability.

Procedure for the study

The researcher and the sixth grade teacher worked together in deciding which of the many critical reading skills included in the school curriculum should be taught in this three month folktale unit. They selected six skills:

1. The ability to classify types and characteristics of folk literature.
2. The ability to compare relevant information from multiple sources and to recognize agreement or contradiction.
3. The ability to discover unstated premises and draw conclusions.
4. The ability to make judgments based on clearly defined standards.
5. The ability to recognize the theme of the story and to evaluate the effectiveness of the presentation of the theme.
6. The ability to recognize and evaluate the use of language to create sensory images and moods, including interpretation of figurative language.

Two reading classes, each with twenty-five sixth graders, participated in the folk literature study taught by Mrs. Bradford. A collection of one hundred and twenty folk literature books, ranging from very easy to difficult reading were placed in the classroom. An annotated bibliography was prepared for the teacher by the researcher. A typical entry is cited here.

> Singer, Isaac Bashevis. When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw and Other Stories. New York: Dell. 1968. (Russian)
>
> A collection of stories to be enjoyed by the individual reader. "Shrewd Todie and Lyser the Miser," "The Elders of Chelm and Genendel's Key," and "When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw" are stories in this collection that deal with amiable fools who convince the town wisemen that their actions are logical. In addition to enjoying the stories for their humor and the Russian regard for the foolish man, attention can be directed to Isaac Singer's use of figurative language and imagery. For example, "It was said of Todie that if he decided to deal in candles the sun would never set."

The general format of the lessons followed a four-step approach, which took from four to six class periods for each lesson. The following is a description of the steps with an example taken from the lessons.

1. The skill was stated and the children were told what was planned for the reading period each day. For example, objectives within the first skill included recognizing characteristics of the four types of folktales that the children would learn to categorize. These four types were fairy tales, animal tales, legends, and myths. The teacher stated that they would be reading these types of stories, and that before defining the types and describing how a story would fit the particular category, she would show examples of each kind from the book collection.
2. The teacher read aloud one or more folktales with content or style which fit the purpose of the lesson. Discussion followed with appropriate

questions by the teacher. Following the introductory statement used as an example in (1) above, the teacher explained the oral tradition for folktales and showed several books in each of the four categories. When she asked predictive questions about what might be found in the stories, children clamored for her to read the books. She ended the first class period by reading Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears by Verna Aardema.

3. Each student selected a book from the collection and read his/her selection independently or with a partner. Directions were given concerning that critical aspect which had been discussed as the skill focus. For example, after the lesson described above, the children were free to select any book they wished to read. They were told that after reading the book, they would be asked "Why read folk literature?" and then a list of reasons would be written together.

4. Throughout the study, response was solicited by a discussion of the stories that the children had read, comparing and contrasting their stories with the story read aloud by the teacher, and with one another. Various forms of discussion were planned such as (1) whole class, guided by written statements that would stimulate reader's response in verbal discussion; (2) whole class, guided by appropriate questions by the teacher; (3) small groups, self-guided through written questions; (4) partners, reading a book together and sharing their responses with the class through their choice of media. Often the class discussions were replaced with creative response. Evidence of critical reading was demonstrated through making posters, creative writing, story-telling by the children, and dramatizing. Film versions of the folktales were viewed and evaluted.

In the example of the introductory lesson, after each child had read a story, a whole class discussion was held. Children were asked to tell what story they had read, and to give one reaon why folktales are worth reading. After the discussion each pupil wrote down two reasons why she/he thought folk literature is being read. Responses included the following.

> Still fun to read, and to understand other people.
> Because they passed it down and they are good books.
> People like to know what people hundreds of years ago used to think about.
> Fun to listen to and you can understand yourself.
> They use such good words.

Critical reading developed

Throughout the study, both a high level of interest was maintained and evidence of improvement in critical reading ability was noted. The researcher, serving as an aide in the classroom, collected field study observations, evaluated written responses, and conducted pupil interviews. Analysis of the data supported the conclusion that critical reading ability improved slowly, with pupils gaining confidence in their own responses as more teaching and independent reading took place. By the tenth week, types of folktales were classified by pupils with 90% accuracy, as compared with less than 50% accuracy when the classifying was begun by the pupils.

By the sixth week children were making evaluative comparison, rather than noting only surface likeness and differences. In a group of students discussing Anansi the Spider, one reader said, "It's like six Chinese Brothers because each son has a special thing he can do."

Other children responded by comparing the differences between the episodes in each story. A girl ended the discussion by saying,

"But the important things, in both stories they all helped and saved their father from trouble."

The following discussion about setting demonstrated the children's ability to discover unstated premises and draw conclusions:

Chris: It's hard to learn anything about the country in some of the folktales, because the storyteller is so interested in the moral of the story he doesn't tell you much else.

Children responded by checking through the books they had with them, and affirming his opinion or disagreeing with him.

Heather: Well, they don't really tell you, but you can figure it out by what's happening.

Jim: Yeh, like this story from Silver Lands. It was so hot when the kids were in, they wanted to go out, and when they were out, then they wanted to go in. That really makes you know what it's like.

Interviews with some of the children revealed a sense of accomplishment after completing the study.

Vicki: This is really fun once you get going. I never really read carefully before.

April: I'm more conscious of what I'm reading now. I kind of read it, you know, and ask myself questions on what I was reading.

Chris: I think it'll help me a lot because now I know what to look for in stories.

Randy: It helps me understand the books and just makes me feel better about what's happened in the story.

Pupil interest noteworthy

Interest was generated more easily and maintained at a higher level than anticipated by either the researcher or the teacher. At the end of the study the teacher stated, "Neither I nor the students grew tired of it because of the variety and depth of the stories."

Interest in having the teacher read aloud to the class remained high throughout the twelve weeks. The sixth graders were a lively group of children with a wide variance in ability and behavior. The read-aloud time

was characterized by undivided attention by most of the pupils. Daily requests were made for certain books or another story about Br'er Rabbit, Baba Yaga. or Anansi.

The day that fairytales were introduced, Mrs. Bradford read a Russian fairytale from The Firebird. A boy was overheard muttering, "I don't want to hear a story about Russia." Three days later, he told the observer that he had just read "a neat book from Russia, Three Rolls and a Doughnut." His apparent negative attitude about a Russian story had been dissolved.

Evidence of interest in reading self-selected folktales from the collection was apparent. Almost daily, one or several would ask, "Can we have time to read on our own today?"

Children wanted to share books that they liked. Wade said, "I really liked One Trick Too Many. How about reading it to the class?"

Brian, who could be categorized a reluctant reader, completed nine books independently during the three months. During an interview he said, "I really don't like to read, but folktales are okay."

Familiarity with a book appeared to increase interest, and books the teacher had read were often choices for independent reading. The interest of boys in reading folktales was noteworthy. The boys read 209 stories compared to 192 for the girls. All four categories were chosen frequently. The 50 pupils recorded the following number of books read during independent reading time:

Fairy tales.....88

Myths.....48

Legends.....163

Animal tales.....102

Children were eager to share story experiences. A favorite activity was preparing simple masks, and, wearing the mask, pantomiming a fable with a partner. The children's interpretation of the moral of the fable gave evidence of the extent of the understanding of the theme.

The importance of having the books available in the classroom was apparent in this class. Children would dash back to the bookcase to get the book that proved their point in a discussion, or one they wanted to compare with the book the teacher was reading.

Instructional implications

The sustained interest shown in these sixth grade classrooms persuaded the researcher and teacher that folktales should be made more readily available to today's young reader. One boy enthusiastically stated, "It's like I found something new."

Folk literature, a genre as old as the printed word, could be something new for teachers to use to stimulate interest in reading and to develop critical reading ability. Ten to twelve-year-old readers appear to respond to folk literature sensitively, at an age when they are developing a sense of the world. The readers sense the universality of the message of the storyteller and relate to the wishes, dreams, and problems of other people. In the setting of the folktale a distance is kept between the reader and the action, because the situations where the problems are met are removed from their own

experience. Therefore, a more powerful emotion can be accepted by the reader than in realistic fiction where the similarity to their own situation could threaten their privacy.

In addition, the universal need or humor is fulfilled in many folktales. The story may be problem-centered, but often the problem is solved with humor, and many characters possess the admirable trait of being able to laugh at themselves. Therefore, the serious development of critical reading ability can be lightened by the use of enjoyable stories.

Children are interested in these books, but they need an understanding teacher, who is actively interested in folk literature and can appreciate a good story, to share these tales and model for the readers how to understand and evaluate the message.

References

1. Aardema, Verna. N.Y. Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears. Illustrated by Lec & Diane Dillon. N.Y.: Dial Press. 1975.

2. Bosma, Bette. "An Experimental Study to Determine the Feasibility of Using Folk Literature to Teach Select Critical Reading Skills to Sixth Graders." Doctoral Dissertation, Michigan State University, East Lansing, 1981.

3. Carew, Jan. The Third Gift. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon, Boston: Little Brown, 1974.

4. Finger, Charles. Tales from Silver Lands. N.Y.: Doubleday, 1924.

5. _____ One Trick Too Many. Illustrated by Helen Siegl. N.Y.: Dial Press, 1973.

6. Ginsburg, Mirra. Three Rolls and One Doughnut: Fables from Russia. Illustrated by Anita Lobel. N.Y.: Dial Press, 1975.

7. Hou-Tien, Chieng. Six Chinese Brothers: An Ancient Tale. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, 1979.

8. McDermott, Gerald. Anansi the Spider. N.Y.: Holt, 1972.

9. National Assessment of Educational Progress. Reading Thinking and Writing (Report 11-L-01) Denver, Colorado. Education Commission of the United States, 1981.

10. Singer, Isaac Bashevis. When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw and Other Stories. New York: Dell, 1968.

11. Zvorykin, Boris. Trans. The Firebird and Other Russian Tales. N.Y.: Viking, 1978.